Four Principles of Good Assessment Practice: A Teaching and Learning Approach to Designing and Assessing Student Work

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ABSTRACT

Assessment is central to student learning in social work education. In professionally accredited programs such as social work, assessment must address professional standards in relation to curriculum and student outcomes. Thus, considered attention to the way assessments function is an important part of academic work and curriculum design. This paper reports on the results of a sub-set of a larger curriculum project, in which the authors undertook a comprehensive assessment mapping of a social work curriculum in an Australian university. The paper here focuses specifically on the results of focus groups undertaken with social work students and academics on their perceptions and experiences of assessment. We utilise this focus group data to present four principles of good assessment practice that can be used to guide a teaching and learning approach to curriculum development and pedagogy as it relates to student assessment in higher education.

Keywords: *Social work education; Assessment; Student learning; Curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on findings from a study into the experiences and perceptions that social work academics and students held about academic assessments within a four-year Bachelor of Social Work program at an Australian university. The authors conducted focus group interviews with social work academics and students as part of a larger project that mapped all assessment tasks in a four-year Bachelor of Social Work curriculum against learning theories, instructional design theories, and industry and disciplinary standards for social work education (Watts & Hodgson, 2014). The changing nature of social work education standards and requirements in Australia, including successive waves of new prescribed curriculum standards from the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2013), supported the rationale for an investigation into the assessments within the curriculum. Reporting on the whole project is beyond the scope of this paper and is published elsewhere (Watts & Hodgson, 2014). Therefore, we focus specifically on the results of the focus groups to illuminate stakeholder views about assessment.

In recent decades there has been a shift to minimum standards for entry level social work education (Laragy, Bland, Giles, & Scott, 2013; Sewpaul & Jones, 2004) and this has led to increasing focus on the development of pedagogic designs that incorporate core content across the various social work curricula. The push towards prescribed content and threshold standards begs questions about the extent to which assessments reflect these minimum standards. Descriptions of how whole social curricula operate to develop student knowledge, skills and values have only rarely been reported in social work (Gray & Gibbons, 2002; Savaya, 2001). Moreover, the main focus of these descriptions tends towards the philosophical elements of the curriculum, rather than focussing on assessment specifically. Critically, assessments are a significant part of the student learning experience and a vehicle for institutional accountability (Carless, 2009). Thus, there is a need to critically examine assessments in the context of overall curriculum development and improvement as well as at the level of individual modules or units of study. Assessment is an area of teaching practice that exercises the energy of academic staff who design curricula and teach modules and units of study. Similarly, it exercises the focus and attention of students who may spend a good deal of what time they can commit to their studies researching, preparing and completing assessment tasks. Students may also spend considerable time and energy navigating and making sense of the university environment as they transition into their studies (Crisp & Fox, 2012). If the context of students' experience is chaotic and incomprehensible, it can negatively impact their experience and identification with their studies. For all these diverse reasons, attention to assessment practices and beliefs held by both staff and students is timely.

The purpose of examining academic staff and student views about assessment reported here is to provide insight into the experience of assessment that would usefully inform curriculum development strategies applicable across the entirety of a professional degree program. While there is extensive literature on assessment in higher education generally (which we discuss below), this is less developed in social work and we suggest that further research into assessment in social work education is warranted. The intention of this paper is to distil key insights from focus group data and situate the findings in the context of

developing assessment principles that would deliver a coherent curriculum and teaching and learning experience for students. The example of our inquiry into a social work curriculum is used here to develop principles that would be applicable in other disciplines.

ASSESSMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Our discussion of assessment is situated within the context of higher education and the literature below reflects this. It has been argued that assessment is central to the processes of student learning (Biggs, 2012; Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Indeed Boud et al., (2010) assert that assessment is a core aspect of teaching and learning and not merely a process of testing and examination. Assessment focusses students' attention and so a considered approach to developing and honing assessment within curriculum may lead to significant benefits for student learning (Boud et al., 2010, p. 1; Taras & Davies, 2013). Given that assessment serves an educational purpose, this focus should, therefore, go beyond certification or credentialism, to provide students with opportunities to produce high-quality work that they can then relate to their own practice. In social work, it is acknowledged that students are largely assessed by academic educators; however, practice teachers, other students, and service users may also contribute to social work student assessments (Crisp, Green Lister, & Dutton, 2006), using a variety of different assessment methods (Crisp & Green Lister, 2002). This is why assess-ment should be "considered within overall curriculum thinking alongside teaching and learning strategies and changing disciplinary content" (Boud et al., 2010, p. 1).

Consequently, Maclellan warns that a considered focus on assessment requires more from academics than just being versed in their disciplinary concepts –t requires "considerable curricular development" (Maclellan, 2004, p. 31). Despite this assertion it was found in her study of 12 academics using in-depth interviews that, although academics could conceptualise and explain what authentic assessment was within the lexicon of their disciplines, the actual attainment of authentic assessments in practice was in fact underdeveloped (Maclellan, 2004). Authentic assessment is indicated by its "fidelity to the real world ways in which knowledge is used in the discipline of study into which the student is being inducted" (Maclellan, 2004, p. 21). Achieving this fidelity requires more than an ad hoc approach to assessing students. Instead, it necessitates the careful discernment and integration of assessment within frameworks that deliver coherence across an entire curriculum.

There are a number of different frameworks that may be utilised for a planned approach to integrating assessment that logically fit with the learning trajectory experienced by students as they move from the beginning to the final stages of their education (Moseley, 2005). A developmental approach, as understood here, is where assessments are designed in ways that encourage students to build upon learning in the earlier stages of their studies, as they move towards progressively more complex assessment tasks. A framework commonly adapted to structure and scaffold learning in this way across a curriculum is Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Krathwohl, 2002). This revision of the original Bloom's taxonomy framework distinguishes between factual, conceptual, procedural and meta-cognitive knowledge (Seaman, 2011). The skills dimension to this framework includes

abilities to remember, understand, analyse, evaluate and create knowledge (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In curriculum terms, these skills are typically conceptualised as learning outcomes or objectives that are designed to foster the attainment of higher order skills and knowledge over time. In order for scaffolding of learning to occur, it follows that assessments should be carefully aligned to the learning outcomes within an overall curriculum instructional design framework (Biggs, 1996). Therefore, assessments must be designed in a logically coherent manner if they are to work towards the attainment and evaluation of higher-order skills and knowledge.

This is particularly challenging in complex curricula like social work that include social-work-specific knowledge and extensive practicum as well as interdisciplinary knowledge from psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and policy. The reason this is challenging is because interdisciplinary knowledge often contains differing ontological and epistemological assumptions (Becher & Trowler, 2001; see also Ylijoki, 2000) and jurisdiction of the design of assessments is largely left to individual academics who may conceptualise their work as being only a part in a larger whole. Therefore, incorporation of assessments into an overall curriculum through deliberate integrative strategies (Tsang, 2013) is important to maintaining levels of practical, theoretical and professional coherence (Heggen & Terum, 2013). Another risk to coherence comes from teaching the required theoretical and conceptual content mandated through accreditation processes, which can result in teaching and learning strategies that emphasise teaching primarily for content understanding, rather than targeting specific learning outcomes in an orderly, planned manner. A possible solution to this is the establishment of a coherently mapped and planned approach to assessment that incorporates a clearly articulated and progressive scaffolding of learning outcomes (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) as well as the knowledge and views of academic staff and students. It is this second element that is the focus of this paper. Incorporating a critical understanding of academic and student experiences of assessment means that significant improvements to assessments within a whole curriculum can be planned and implemented (Gillett & Hammond, 2009).

Attitudes towards assessment

Academic staff may hold very different views about assessment, leading to different methods and approaches of assessing students (Chan & Elliott, 2004; Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, & Mayes, 2005). Research by Taras and Davies (2013) found that academics they surveyed had mixed, unclear and often contradictory understandings of the terminology and purposes of assessment. Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) interviewed 20 academics on their beliefs about assessment. They identified a range of belief dimensions that academics held about assessment: knowledge reproduction (recall of information); knowledge application (modifying knowledge for specific situations); and, knowledge transformation (transforming and constructing knowledge). Each of these dimensions involves different assumptions about what assessment is for and what it should look like. Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) concluded that orientations towards assessment do differ amongst educators and this is to be expected. These findings were confirmed in a subsequent study where it was also found that academic staff may also hold differing conceptions of teaching depending on the level of the student cohort (Norton et al., 2005). All of these differences account for variances in approaches to teaching and interactions with students, and differences in the form and

function of feedback given on assessment (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002). The consequence of this is some considerable diversity in the way assessments are designed and communicated to students. While this diversity may yield some benefits in assessing for a broad range of skills and abilities, there is a problem in that curricula on the whole may lack coherence and integration.

Such differences can lead to considerable misunderstanding between academics and students about the purposes and functions of assessment. In a study conducted by Fletcher and colleagues (Fletcher, Meyer, Anderson, Johnston, & Rees, 2012) of student and academic staff attitudes on assessment, differences in views about assessments were found to exist between academics and students. Fletcher et al. surveyed 877 faculty and 1,224 students across four New Zealand tertiary institutions. They found that academics perceived assessment to be about learning, improving teaching, and institutional validation of teaching outcomes. In contrast, students perceived assessment to be largely about accountability for both the student and the institution, and in many cases, perceived assessment to be irrelevant and unfair. This gap between such perceptions is a problem according to Fletcher et al., because it points to an "absence of a clear institutional policy, an empirical base, and lack of transparency around assessment practices" (Fletcher et al., 2012, p. 130). Such problems may serve to undermine trust between student, academic staff and institution (Carless, 2009; Fletcher et al., 2012).

A considered focus on curriculum development – including attention to stakeholder views about assessment – may assist in the development of a clearer sense of coherence (Tatto, 1996) between the professional field (in this case social work) and what the curriculum is aiming to achieve. Coherence refers to:

…the degree of internal connection or, alternatively, fragmentation of the program – the way that different parts of education are related to each other and to future professional work. In this sense, coherence is the result of the practical relevance of the curriculum, the content and organisation of the education. (Heggen & Terum, 2013, p. 4)

Coherence is an important way in which professional education socialises students into particular professional identities (Heggen & Terum, 2013). Social work is considered to be a professional education because of its extensive practicum requirements (Shulman, 2005), and public accountability for practice standards, ethical code, and theory base (Greenwood, 1957; Larrison & Korr, 2013). Critically, this means that curriculum coherence is a necessary pre-requisite for the attainment of higher-order skills, knowledge and threshold standards for graduating social workers. This research is a first step to exploring attitudes to assessment in social work specifically.

METHODOLOGY

The approach to this study was informed by the view that student and academic staff experiences of assessment were central to understanding assessment practices within a curriculum. Thus, as Boud and his colleagues suggest, assessment is most effective when students are in partnership with educators to enable them to progressively take

responsibility for their own learning (Boud et al., 2010). Dialogue about assessment between staff and students should be commonplace, as this supports student understanding of the rationale for particular learning activities and assessment judgements made about their work (Boud et al., 2010).

The study sought to understand the experiences and views that students and academic staff held about assessment in order to consider the process of assessment reform and constructive alignment of the whole curriculum. Specific questions that guided this study were:

- How do students experience assessment across four years of the Bachelor of Social Work program?
- Can students articulate what assessment teaches them in terms of knowledge, skills and values (cognitive, conative and affect)?
- What do teaching staff think they are achieving in setting assessments?

The approach to achieving the aims of the study was through the use of focus groups, an approach to exploring assessment that is similar to that used by Rae and Cochrane (2008) in their study of assessment. Focus groups are generally comprised of small groups of people who have something in common, and the role of the researcher is to facilitate discussion among the members of the group about a particular topic or issue (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007; Thomas, 2013). For example, students have a shared experience of doing assessments as part of a social work education, and our role as investigators was to facilitate discussion amongst them on what their experiences and thoughts were of such assessments. The purpose of using focus groups was to gain a qualitative account of the student experience that goes beyond those used in typical student evaluation questionnaires (Adams & McNab, 2013; Jordan & Ono, 2011).

The sampling method overall was opportunistic. Social work academic staff were recruited using an email information letter and consent form following a discussion about the project at a staff meeting (N=5). The academic staff focus group was facilitated by the authors, who also teach in the Bachelor of Social Work program. Students were recruited by email sent through a learning management system website (Blackboard). Three student focus groups were held (N=18). To be eligible to participate in the focus groups, students must have had completed at least one assessment whilst enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work.

In following the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2013), the researchers ensured that student and staff consent was indeed voluntary and their willingness to participate or otherwise did not compromise their standing or relationship in the social work course. Students are stakeholders and ethically it is important that their voices are heard on matters to do with teaching and assessment, something that is underdeveloped in higher education (Seale, 2010). We are aware of the power differentials that operate in doing research with students and this was discussed in an open and reflexive manner with students

in the focus groups (Etherington, 2007). We were clear with students that the purpose of the focus groups was to discuss assessments specifically with a view to sharing their experiences so that lessons can be learnt and improvements made, and we encouraged students to make thoughtful and respectful contributions to this end. Likewise, the purpose of the staff focus group was, not to enter into an evaluation, but to explore in a collegial manner the experiences and perceptions of designing and setting assessments. Institutional ethics approval was granted for the focus group methodology. In all cases, information to participate was voluntary, consent was obtained in writing, and the data were anonymised.

Data analysis

Focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed professionally. Audio recordings were transcribed into MS Word documents and these were initially subjected to a thematic analysis. The transcripts were read and coded separately by each of the authors. First coding processes produced ideas rather than final categories. A second coding process was undertaken, and this time the main themes and sub-themes were related back to the key questions of the research. A coding manual was constructed and this included a definition of each theme, a description of how to recognise the theme when it occurs in the data or transcript, and exemplars drawn from the data to illustrate its meaning (Boyatsis, 1998, cited in Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 4). Having sorted the data into codes and themes, we examined them further with reference to two frameworks developed by Samuelowicz and Bain (1992, 2002). We utilised elements of their frameworks to contextualise and discuss the results of the focus groups below.

RESULTS

Sequencing, scaffolding and coherence

Our findings lend support to the argument that assessments in a curriculum should ideally be clearly sequenced as a method of integrating knowledge, teaching and learning outcomes (Krathwohl, 2002). Essentially, this is about alignment in the curriculum, which is where the assessment and wider curricula objectives meet and result in the "desired performance of understanding" (Biggs, 1996, p. 354).

Students expressed the view that later assessments should build on the foundation in the first years and this was generally what students experienced. For example:

Yeah, every bit of work that I do, I look back in my mind and I see these first year and second year units, as being the stepping stones. At the time, they were this enormous obstacle, but now they are my stepping stones and building blocks. And I really see, that's one thing that I've really noticed this year. Everything is just falling into place. (Student focus group participant)

Moreover, students also felt that while first-year subjects felt hard, they subsequently made sense and were built upon later in the curriculum:

Yeah, so I found first year assessments were good to build us up to second year, more references, more words, slowly, slowly and to the point, "we're not going to tell you how many references you

need anymore, you've got to work that out for yourself now, you've got to figure it out." (Student focus group participant)

At the same time, students expressed the importance of assessment for facilitating and building on their learning. Students offered many examples of where this had happened and almost as many examples of assessment that seemed unrelated to their learning. One student summed up the feeling about assessment relevance expressed by students in all three student focus groups:

Why do I need to know how to do this or that? I mean they might be relevant, I'm not saying that they're completely not, but I just would prefer to have it explained to me, why it's relevant… (Student focus group participant)

The issue of relevance is important given the study by Kember, Ho, and Hong (2008) that found that relevance was a significant influential factor in the motivation or demotivation of students. Relevance is typically established within the link between abstract theory and practice, and to some extent a professional career. Assessments that were most relevant in this sense were motivating, and conversely those that lacked relevance were demotivating (Kember et al., 2008). The way that academic staff in our study dealt with this was to respond to the challenge of making assessments "work" through good integration of assessment with learning outcomes and content requirements. For example:

…you've got your core ideas of what you want to assess within the outcomes and then it's a matter of working out what's the best way to assess that skill or that knowledge… it's always some sort of balancing act between those two things [learning outcomes and content]. (Academic Staff focus group participant)

This was also seen as an important accountability measure with students concerning delivery on learning outcomes; however, a consistent and explicit link to "establishing relevance to local cases, relating material to everyday applications, or finding applications in current newsworthy issues" (Kember et al., 2008, p. 249) can help bridge the connection between institutionally prescribed learning outcomes and content, with the experiences, and interests of academics and students alike. This is especially important in professional programs like social work that have a clear professional practice goal at the same time as relying on what Kember et al. (2008) call "building block curriculum" (p. 260). If the building block curriculum is not explicitly mapped out for students or articulated in terms of relevance, this may affect morale and negatively impact student engagement and motivation (Kember et al., 2008).

Academic staff in this study expressed how it can be difficult to discern if a particular assessment will work until students submit their work. However, the way this was addressed in practice is by changing assessment as a process of incremental "tweaks" rather than a total overhaul in any one teaching period. The benefit of this was that it gave staff an opportunity to test one change but preserve other assessments in the same subject where the subject is working well. Incremental changes to assessment may become a problem over time if collectively they manifest as drift, creating a disjointed and incoherent curriculum overall. Therefore,

mechanisms and processes to ensure that any tweaks are implemented within a whole of curriculum view remain critical for maintaining a coherent curriculum over time.

Knowledge, theory and practice

Assessments should provide students with opportunities to link theory to practice and engage their work with real world problems and situations (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Kember, et al., 2008). Participants in the academic staff focus group discussed the importance of integration between the practical and theoretical components of the curriculum:

…it's about linking the academic and theoretical across the whole curriculum to experiential and practical; so I guess it's like transferring learning to application but also then transferring the application back to learning so completing that circle. (Academic Staff focus group participant)

As mentioned, this is also an expectation held by students, but given their stake in the benefit of the assessment it was a stronger theme than in the academic data. Overall, students wanted to know that the assessment activities they were undertaking connected with their future careers. For example, students made explicit links between the need for oral presentation skills and the presentations they are likely to give in class to their future practice. They also suggested that the practice of giving presentations could be enhanced by explicit teaching to support attaining this skill:

I've got a big thing about oral presentations because they're a big component to a social worker's professional life. And we don't actually do any workshopping presentations, we're expected to give one, and we're expected to give the content, and be good at presenting without any formal introduction to it. There's a small component in that first year unit that we do, and that's it. (Student focus group participant)

And:

I think we could do with a few more reports … assessments, because when we're out in the field, that's what we're going to be doing. I think it was third year, maybe, that I got to do the first report that we had. And I thought, "oh God". So you have to write a few to get used to them, I think. (Student focus group participant)

Given that so much of social work practice is transacted in oral forms (speaking, presenting, and communicating orally), the importance of developing and assessing these skills in a consistent manner should be explicit (Tsang, 2007).

The forms and functions of assessment will invariably privilege what the student sees as important, and so a question arises as to what counts as knowledge and how is it constructed: is knowledge externally constructed or personalised? (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001, p. 310). In our data, it was clear that what should be taught and assessed is largely the result of externally constructed standards and the resulting curriculum set down by the Australian Association of Social Workers Education and Accreditation Standards (Laragy et

al., 2013). In practice, this means that teaching is focused on prescribed content in relation to learning outcomes, derived from discipline specific skills and knowledge. This content was presented to students in multiple forms and it was expected that students integrate these different forms of knowledge in undertaking assessment (Boitel, Farkas, Fromm, & Hokenstad, 2009; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002, p. 183). These sources were mostly curriculum, pedagogy and official literature, but there are some exceptions where a student's own experience is drawn upon, usually in reflective, Problem Based Learning (PBL) exercises, practical, or group assessments.

Teaching, learning and the place of assessments

Assessment is an inherently contested domain of the teaching and learning process and experience, and various competing demands manifest within the forms and functions of assessments. Assessments should strike a balance between teacher, institutional and discipline requirements, and different student learning needs and the beliefs and experiences students hold about assessments. Students in the focus groups expressed various understandings about the purpose of assessment and tended to ground their discussion in particular subjects, even though the questions asked of them were general. On the whole, students saw assessment as a fact of life in university and considered it as something they needed to endure to complete their study. A few students in the focus groups suggested an alternative view of assessment, as an indicator of achievement:

I think for me the assessments have actually been challenging as they push me and make me work harder…increases my ability to learn, and internalise some things.
(Student focus group participant)

The differing views among students are related to different academic conceptions of the role of assessment in learning, from one pole in which assessment is viewed as an institutional mechanism for requiring students to study and attain minimum competence considered essential to a discipline, to the other pole where assessment is viewed as an integral part of *teaching* and is a key way of helping students *learn* (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002, pp. 182–183). In our data, there is evidence from both students and academic staff of both poles operating: assessments are viewed as mechanisms for content learning and assisting learning more broadly, yet the content and learning is teacher-controlled and assessments are, invariably, used for rating performance.

Consequently, students were very clear about the importance of assessment to their learning whilst at the same time reported that they were expected to undertake assessments that may not have been their preferred kind of activity. In particular, students were able to articulate the different effects for learning from different kinds of assessments. For example, students welcomed essays for developing deep engagement with particular topics, the use of case studies for engaging in the relation of theory and practice, and oral presentations for developing abilities to convey ideas orally. Students were mixed in their evaluation of the use of reflective practice paper assessments, and practical assessments related to work-integrated learning were welcomed for the way they enabled learning on field placement to be represented. Again, this is an example of the importance of relevance and real-world applicability that students expect from assessment tasks.

As with students, the academic staff in the focus groups expressed both expectations and concerns about assessment. Staff affirmed the important role that assessment plays in how they conceive of teaching and learning. Overall, most of the staff data indicate a focus on assessment as a mechanism to support learning outcomes, knowledge development, and testing understanding of relevant content. Students also saw assessment as tied to learning outcomes, knowledge and content areas. But, if students held the view that assessments are about *knowing more*, and are thus teacher-controlled, then they expected fairness and relevance to be made clear in the assessments. This included the expectation that they are given explicit teaching or instruction in the things they are actually being assessed on.

Feedback, fairness and collaboration

Carless (2009) contends that assessments should include some engagement between academic staff and students about what the assessments are for, how they work, and what experiences students have of the assessments. Rae and Cochrane (2008) state that feedback should be about student learning and that, too often, feedback is about academics justifying grades. This traditional and largely dominant approach to feedback does not effectively engage with or listen to students' experiences, interpretations and applications of the feedback to their learning and development, nor does it foster self-management and engagement (Rae & Cochrane, 2008). For feed forward to be effective, the practice of setting and grading assessments should be transparent and fair, the purpose of the assessment should be clear, the link to other assessments explicit, and feedback should include a focus not just on performance, but on learning and progress made towards the ultimate goal of qualifying as a social worker (Rae & Cochrane, 2008).

As discussed, assessments are artefacts of institutional prescriptions and accreditation standards that entail judgements about students' work (Carless, 2009). Students accepted this, but consequently held the expectation that academic staff would be very clear and transparent about the requirements of each assessment, and how the part related to the whole. Each student focus group discussed this issue and cited positive instances, but also examples where they had been less than clear about the assessment expectations:

…assessments are quite often difficult—they seem simple on first reading but when you've got a whole lot of questions in your head…it's really hard to figure it out for yourself. (Student focus group participant)

Students also expressed a desire for assessment marking to reflect the criteria that had been expressly given to them. Part of the issue here is that operating within assessment practices are explicit and not so explicit assumptions around what are good and poor answers to an assessment, otherwise known as a hidden curriculum (Bergenhenegouwen, 1987; Holosko, Skinner, MacCaughelty, & Stahl, 2010). A good versus a poor answer rests on criteria utilised by academics to perceive student achievement in assessment tasks (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002). This may be as simple as whether or not a student can recall and reproduce transmitted content with accuracy, or apply with relevance what is recalled to purposeful and justified conclusions from information presented (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002, p. 182). In our data, for academic staff a good answer needed to reflect what was specified in assessment criteria and rubrics. This was true for students too, but they still reported

instances of having to sometimes "guess" what a good answer was and could be disappointed if they missed the mark.

Nowhere was this issue more energetically raised amongst students than when they discussed group- or team-based assessments, as this is also related to student perception of fairness in judgements on their assessment. Group marks were generally accepted, but the students' discussion emphasised the need for greater care in transparent processes in arriving at a shared mark. They also made many comments about sharing marks with student colleagues who did not "lift their weight" in group assignments.

Students were largely positive about working with student colleagues, but wanted more opportunities to choose who they would work with and in what ways. In general, students did not appreciate being randomly allocated to groups, and students did not agree with the rationale given by staff that they will be required to work in teams in the workplace and the suggestion that group- or team-work assessments are preparation for this. Although group- or team-work is a fact of modern working life, the teaching and assessment of the skills and knowledge required here need to be successfully integrated into a whole curriculum in order for it to reach the levels of authenticity that would engage students more.

Students also found group assignments challenging when they were asked to assess themselves or their peers using self- and peer-assessment processes. While some students did say that they had gained from this practice, they were generally not in favour of these types of assessment. Peer- and self-assessment has gained considerable currency within higher education as an important method to increase students' judgement of their own work as well as a way to build transferable skills (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). However, in the focus groups students were not as accepting of this kind of assessment as they were of writing essays, for example.

Finally, perceptions about fairness, transparency and performance are intrinsically wrapped up in the kinds of feedback students receive from educators about their work. There are inevitably different views of how feedback should be utilised by students with respect to teaching and learning (Carless, 2006; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002, p. 182). As stated, feedback on assessments should facilitate learning on how to improve one's work, but overall students felt this happened only when feedback was timely and was available before the next assignment was due. This was considered an important way to improve performance and judge the kind of effort required to succeed and is a process referred by Rae and Cochrane (2008) as "feed forward", whereby students can become more active in their learning and apply the feedback to future work.

In our data, for students, feedback is for learning from or gauging their competence and ability in accordance with how they are ranked and graded on their assessments. Academic staff held a similar view, but with the addition that feedback is also used to justify the grade awarded. Again this issue of fairness was discussed in relation to students being marked against the information they have been given in the class. Overall, academic staff, in line with students, also considered fairness and transparency as important to relationships between staff and students. Indeed, staff suggested that if these relationships were

characterised by positive interactions, then difficulties when assessments do not run well are more likely to be effectively discussed with students and resolved. Thus, an important value expressed by the academic staff in our study was the importance of working collaboratively with students.

CONCLUSION

Both staff and student focus groups invested energy into understanding the importance of teaching and learning in assessment, and staff and students were likewise interested in understanding the overall coherence of assessments within the curriculum. In particular, students looked to the relevance and alignment of assessment for future practice. There are four main points that are important to developing principles and practices for assessments that can be applied at a whole-of-curriculum level.

First, it should be apparent to students that the assessments they undertake in a course of study are clearly sequenced and coherently integrate knowledge, teaching and learning outcomes. This is a point about alignment and the design of curriculum itself and the important place that assessments have within the design of a curriculum. This means that assessments should be planned and developed in ways that allow for assessments to relate, to build upon, and to create the conditions that lead to the development of a mix of skills and attributes. Ideally staff should be able to articulate how their unit and assessment fit within the curriculum as a whole. Second, assessments should be consistently designed to integrate theory and practice by being situated strongly in real-world practice situations, scenarios and contexts. This means that assessments should be intentionally designed to replicate elements of professional practice skills, knowledge and values. Third, the pedagogy that supports the forms and functions of assessments should work towards accommodating the tensions between teacher, institutional and discipline requirements for prescribed content knowledge and understanding. Moreover, assessment should provide opportunities for students to undertake assignments that are student-centred, reflective, and allow space for knowledge development from experience and practice. The fourth point is an ethical one. For students, assessments can be high-stakes situations, and so assessments should be planned and developed with the principles of fairness and transparency in mind. Collaboration and open discussion with students is one way to support this ethic, along with due regard to providing feedback that helps students build on their learning and understand their progress towards their goal of qualifying as a social worker.

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